

The Briefing



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Seven Principles of Prayer

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Prayer is a universal phenomenon amongst mankind. Men and women have always prayed everywhere. It is a natural consequence of believing in God. Humanity, by nature, believes in the existence of deity, that is, in a super-human, powerful, eternal being or beings with whom we are related and on whom, in some way, we depend. It is a concept congruous with our knowledge of ourselves and of the world. And so prayer is a natural activity. It springs out of our sense of need and of God's relationship to us and his ability to help.

However, if prayer is to be acceptable to the One to whom we direct it, it must be in accordance with the mind and character of God. That is to say, our prayers to God must be in accordance with his revealed will, both in how we approach him and what we ask for. Man-made methods of prayer will not honour God, nor will they be answered, for to answer a prayer that is wrong is simply to confirm the error on which it is based.

God is truth and we must approach God in truth if we are to relate to him through our prayers. So we must approach him in the way his Word teaches us to. True prayer, when prayed within God's character and according to his will, honours God; but erroneous prayer simply distorts his character. True prayer is a form of worship of God, for true prayer is based on faith and expresses our belief as to what God's character is.

In the Bible we find many exhortations and promises about prayer. God hears prayer and loves to answer prayer. If we pray in accordance with his mind we will be related to him and we will receive answers.

Prayer is difficult; it is difficult to persevere in prayer; it is difficult to know how we ought to pray. We may sum up how to pray under seven heads, and for the sake of aid to memory they may be put in alliterative form—relationship, recognition, request, repetition, resignation, rejoicing and realisation.

The first act in prayer is to establish relationship

Jesus told us that, when we pray, we should address God as Father. This is how he himself prayed. To address God as Father is to bring ourselves into a very personal relationship with God, who dwells in our hearts through his Spirit. We speak to him personally as a child to his father, who is responsible for and cares for his children, and so we approach him in love, knowing that he loves us.

True prayer is based on this intimate and close relationship. Straight away we will see that some forms of pseudo prayer are immediately excluded, such as transcendental meditation which is mindless repetition of words. It is not prayer at all because prayer is relationship and Christian prayer is relationship to God as Father. Nor is prayer which is addressed to the saints or to the blessed virgin Mary Christian prayer, because we are not related to the saints nor to the virgin Mary, but we are related to our heavenly Father through the Spirit. We do not have the spirit of the saints, or of the virgin Mary, but we do have the Spirit of the Father given to us in our heart and it is through this eternal Spirit that we offer our prayers. Relationship is the first principle of prayer.

The second is recognition of the One to whom we pray

God is a great God; he is the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, yet he invites us to come before him with our prayers. In the prayers of the Bible, the most frequent form of recognition of God is the recognition of his power in creation. When the early Christians approached God in prayer ([Acts 4:24 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%204.24\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Acts%204.24)), they began, “O Lord, you who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that in them is”. They recognized the sovereign power of God. God the Creator was the One to whom they were bringing their petitions.

Similarly in the Old Testament, when David prayed to God at the dedication of the gifts for the temple ([1 Chron 29:10-11 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%2029.10-11\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/1%20Chron%2029.10-11)), he addressed God as “yours, Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heaven and the earth is yours, yours is the kingdom, Lord, and you are exalted as head above all”. In the prayer at the reading of the law, in [Nehemiah 9:5-6 \(https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Neh%209.5-6\)](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Neh%209.5-6), God is addressed “you are the Lord, even you alone, you have made heaven, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all things that are thereon, the seas and all that is in them, and you preserve them all”.

The God to whom we come in prayer is a great God, the Creator God, the sovereign God over all things. Our prayers must recognize to whom it is we pray. Our Lord himself set the example in this. In [Matthew 11](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2011) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt%2011>) he began his prayer, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth”. In this opening phrase he established the relationship—“Father”—and he recognized and adored God’s power in the phrase “Lord of heaven and earth”.

Adoration and praise is an essential part of our prayer and it arises naturally as we reflect on the greatness of the One who invites us to come into his presence with our prayers. When our Lord spent the night in Gethsemane agonising in prayer he addressed God as “Father” and he recognized God’s character by that wonderful, short, very telling phrase, “nothing is too hard for you”. This prayer is recorded in [Mark 14:36](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2014.36) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Mark%2014.36>) where we read “and he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible to you, remove this cup from me. However, not what I will but what you will”.

‘Abba’, the Aramaic word for ‘my father’, was the word that Jesus learned in his own home as a child. It was how he addressed his parents, and it is also how he addressed God. We have, in this wonderful phrase ‘Abba, Father’, a double underlining of the fact that we are related to God to whom we bring our prayers, as a child related to a loving father. Then our Lord went on to recognize the power of the One to whom he brought his petition, “all things are possible to you”, said our Lord. He was bringing this petition, which he felt so deeply, to the One who was able to hear and to answer, if that were his wise will.

Another form of opening recognition found in the Scripture is that God is the covenant God. He keeps his promises (e.g. [Dan 9:4](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%209.4) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Dan%209.4>) and [II Chron 6:14](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Chron%206.14) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/2%20Chron%206.14>)). In the Lord’s Prayer we have a very short phrase recognizing God’s character—“Father in heaven”. In these three words we acknowledge our relationship with the One to whom we pray and we recognize his status. He is our Father in heaven, the heavenly, supreme God. It will be seen that mysticism and so-called wordless prayer is not prayer at all, for in this form of mental activity there is no relationship acknowledged, nor is there recognition as to the character of the One to whom we bring our prayers.

There is a third principle which controls the character of true prayer and this is request

Prayer means request and consists of requests. In the Lord’s Prayer, which Jesus gave his disciples as a pattern as to how to pray, after the opening statement of relationship and recognition the prayer consists entirely of requests—seven in all. “Hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done” are the opening three requests. They are concerned with God’s affairs and are followed by four requests with regard to ourselves; “give us”, “forgive us”, “lead us”, “deliver us”. Then the prayer ends.

Prayer consists of requests. We are constantly invited to bring our petitions to God. “Let your requests be made known to God”, said St Paul, and James said “You have not because you ask not”. But, of course, our requests must be in accordance with the character of God if they are to honour God, if they are to be part of true worship and if they are to receive an answer in the way that we would wish. What we ask for is an indication of what we value.

The Lord’s Prayer begins asking that God’s name may be hallowed. Is this the sort of prayer that comes naturally to our lips when we have the opportunity of asking for something which we want? The Lord’s Prayer goes on to ask that God’s kingdom might be inaugurated and that his will might be done. If we are so taken up with the things of this world that we bypass God and his kingdom, our prayers will show that we have not got our priorities right. After all, there is nothing more desirable than that men and women everywhere should acknowledge God as he really is, that is, should hallow his name. What a change it would make to our world! This should be the first prayer on our lips, for it should be the constant longing of our heart. So, too, when God’s kingdom comes and his judgement vindicates the righteous, what a glorious prospect that will be. And when all men do his will, heaven will have come to earth. These are God’s purposes and will be fulfilled. We should identify with them; they should be uppermost in our mind and should spring readily to our lips in prayer.

Then the Lord’s Prayer turns to our own needs, our daily sustenance and the need of forgiveness. Confession of sins and prayer for forgiveness will always be a true part of Christian prayer. Confession and seeking forgiveness, along with praise and adoration (with which we begin our prayer), is part of that recognition of God and his character by which we honour God in prayer. Requests also honour God for they are the exercise of faith toward his loving promises. Voiceless prayer is not Christian prayer because it has no place for requests, of which Christian prayer (as taught by our Lord) consists.

The fourth element in prayer is repetition

Jesus emphasised that we should persevere in prayer. Our prayers should spring from our deepest longings and desires, and we should not hesitate to bring these constantly before God in prayer. In [Luke 18](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2018) (<https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Luke%2018>), Jesus said “Men ought always to pray and not to give up” and he told the story of the unjust judge who could not care less about providing justice for a poor widow who, nevertheless, succeeded in obtaining justice simply by constantly asking the judge to give her the justice she was asking for. So our Lord said we should importune God with similar perseverance, not that God is a reluctant judge, nevertheless the example of even the unjust judge giving in at last to the constant prayer of his petitioner was a lesson to Christians to persevere in prayer.

So, persevering in prayer is an essential characteristic of prayer. It shows, not only that we really desire what we are asking for, but that we also believe that God will answer. Our Lord himself gave us an example. He was greatly grieved in soul, as he told his disciples, on the eve of the crucifixion and he prayed in Gethsemane with perseverance and

intensity. Three times he prayed saying the same words, because those words were simple, direct and carried the meaning of what he wanted; “Father, if it is possible may this cup pass from me”. Three times he prayed that prayer. He did not, of course, receive the answer that he had hoped for, but he received the answer that it was God’s will that he should drink the cup. He drank it with full faith and he received the strength to drink it to God’s honour and to our salvation. His prayer was answered in line with his real need.

The Apostle Paul is another example of persevering in prayer. He was troubled by what he called a “thorn in the flesh”, a messenger from Satan; something, presumably, not only unpleasant but a hindrance to his ministry. He prayed three times that it might be taken away—not once, not twice but three times. In the end he received the answer that it was better for him and for his ministry if the thorn stayed and so he gladly received that answer and glorified God through the very thing which he had hoped might be removed.

We are to persevere in prayer; repetition is one of the characteristics of true Christian prayer—not mindless repetition but repetition because the prayer springs from the bottom of our heart, reflecting our deepest longing and offered to the God who sympathizes with us in all our needs and trials and situations. We should persevere in prayer, repeat our prayers until God gives us the answer and makes clear to us what his mind is in the matter. Then we gladly accept that.

This brings me to the fifth principle of prayer—resignation

When we pray we should pray with the attitude of gladly accepting God’s will in every situation, whatever that will may be. It is through perseverance in prayer that we learn what God’s will is. Our resignation is not a resignation to a blind unthinking fate, to blind impersonal forces which take no interest in us or in our situation. Rather, it is the glad acceptance of the will of the heavenly Father with whom we are related. Thus Jesus, in his prayer at Gethsemane, said “Father, may this cup pass from me, yet not my will but yours be done” and when, at the end of that session of prayer, it was plain to him that the Father’s will was that he should drink that cup, he said to his disciples, “Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me”.

Our resignation is the acceptance of the perfect will of One whom we love and trust and know. Indeed, it is the will of One whose will we know to be perfect and whose will we wish to be accomplished on earth as in heaven; because if that will is done then all things will be well. Our Lord, after he had experienced the rebuffs of the Galilean communities, rested in God’s will. He said, “I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes; yes, Father, for it was well pleasing in your sight”. We, too, are to have the same confident trust and acceptance of God’s perfect will, even when our prayers and our hopes are not fulfilled in the way we had at first desired.

The sixth principle of true Christian prayer is rejoicing in the will of God

We are to pray with thanksgiving. “In all things making our requests to God with thanksgiving”, said St Paul. So, too, Jesus prayed with thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is an essential characteristic of recognition of the true God, for God is a very gracious God in creation and particularly in redemption, and our hearts should be always filled with thanksgiving.

He fills our life with joy and gladness and we should recognize the source from which this comes. As we enjoy the good things of life we should be thankful to God who gave them and, even when we are in adverse circumstances, we should be rejoicing in our sufferings while we pray that those sufferings may be alleviated and pass away. Jesus himself taught us to pray that we should not enter into temptation (i.e. testing) but pray to be delivered; yet always rejoicing in what God has allowed to take place. Not that we appreciate or enjoy the suffering, but we rejoice in God in the midst of our suffering, knowing that it is our heavenly Father’s will for us. He who controls all things, invites us to bring our requests to him that he might answer them according to what is wise and good so that we, accepting his gifts and his answers, may rejoice in him with thanksgiving for all his goodness.

The greatest of all his goodness in the present life is the privilege of standing in his presence through his Spirit and offering to him our petitions in prayer. It is his love in providing us salvation in Jesus Christ that enables us to do this and so all our prayers are offered in the name of Christ through the salvation which he has brought us.

This is the last principle of prayer—

—the realisation or acknowledgement of the only ground on which we can offer prayer to “the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy”. It is only through Christ’s righteousness that we stand in God’s presence. It is only in Christ that we have been adopted by our heavenly Father as his sons and daughters into his family. If our prayers are to be offered in the area of truth, they must be offered in the realisation and acknowledgement that it is only through our Lord Jesus Christ that we have access to the heavenly throne of grace.